

Oregon State Hospital goes digital to improve treatment

By Alan Gustafson

Statesman Journal

November 12, 2011

Oregon State Hospital has entered the digital age, launching a computerized medical records system designed to improve patient care, reduce errors and ease work loads for employees at the 128-year-old psychiatric facility.

A \$25 million electronic health records system started humming on Nov. 1 — the first stage in a phased conversion from paper to digital.

Hospital doctors and nurses welcome the switch.

"I don't actually have to go to a ward to find a patient's chart now," said Dr. Brian Little, the hospital's chief of medicine. "I can be anywhere in the hospital, either here or at the Portland campus, and get patient histories, see their diagnoses, see what their allergies are, read the most recent notes, and then be able to go ahead and make decisions."

Little cited improved legibility as another benefit provided by electronic records.

"One of the first things I noticed immediately was going through the patients' charts and being able to easily read other clinicians (notes)," he said. "That makes a tremendous difference. As you are aware, sometimes physicians don't always have the best hand writing."

Also enthusiastic about electronic record keeping is Laurie Molan, a registered nurse who has worked at OSH for almost 18 years.

Molan appreciates easier access to patient charts and the end of chronic problems that have plagued the paper-dominated system.

"We were kind of all fighting over the same blue chart," she said. "It's really going to simplify that problem."

Electronic records are expected to provide better tracking of medications, lab results, dietary requirements, pharmacy orders, patient behavior, treatment plans and more.

Obsolete practices will fade away as the hospital's reliance on paper folds, officials said. For example, patients won't have to lug around their medical charts in backpacks as they move from residential units to treatment areas.



Danielle Peterson / Statesman Journal
Consultant Jean Lea works on updating the 128-year-old Oregon State Hospital's paper records with a new electronic patient records system.

Years of planning went into devising the computerized system, officially called the Behavioral Health Integration Project.

Project manager Ben Kahn said the electronic system is getting mostly favorable reviews from staffers.

"So far, so good," he said. "We've gotten e-mails from nurses who say things that used to take an hour now take five minutes."

Conversion to the digital system comes several years after federal investigators cited flawed medical record keeping in a report that documented sweeping defects in patient care.

"I think the hospital staff deserve recognition for managing the hospital with just paper," Kahn said. "But now they have a better tool to use to provide better care, and I think it will make their jobs easier and provide a safer environment for the patients."

The computerized system links state hospital campuses in Salem and Portland.

Training 1,500 hospital employees to use the new system was no simple task.

"We had two months of around-the-clock training because we have three shifts — day, swing and night," Kahn said. "It was kind of like on a submarine where you have hot bunking. These seats never got cold because we brought more people in."

Help is being provided for hospital workers who are not computer savvy, Kahn said. He noted that 170 employees, dubbed "super users," were trained to assist frustrated co-workers, as needed.

"They are there to help folks who are struggling, so that they don't have to call the service desk," Kahn said.

The electronic system began operating at 12:01 a.m. on Nov. 1 — Halloween night.

"We had to start it on the first of the month because we have a lot of processes that begin on the first of the month," Kahn said.

To Kahn's relief, no major glitches popped up.

Plans call for adding new features and additional information to the electronic system early next year.

"We've only rolled out about 30- to 40-percent of what's currently in the charts," Little said. "No health systems roll everything out at the same time — it's overwhelming, so we do it in stages."

By next summer, he said, the conversion should be complete.

Funding for the state-of-the-art records system was provided within a \$458 million package approved by the 2007 Legislature to build two new psychiatric hospitals to replace the crumbling state hospital complex in Salem.

Construction of a 620-bed replacement hospital on the OSH campus in central Salem is slated for completion early next year.

After that, plans call for building a smaller hospital on state prison land in Junction City.

Eventually, the electronic records system will extend to the Junction City facility and the Blue Mountain Recovery Center in Eastern Oregon.

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OSH Revamps Records

A new state-of-the-art computerized medical records system at the Oregon State Hospital is expected to provide better tracking of medications, lab results, dietary requirements, pharmacy orders, treatment plans, patient discharge plans and more.